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Randall Kline

You may have to wait two years to enjoy a performance at the new SFJAZZ Center in San Francisco, but you won't have to wait to learn what this new cultural institution will bring to the Hayes Valley neighborhood as well as the wide world of jazz. Executive Artistic Director and Founder Randall Kline sat down with Gentry to pull back the curtain on the plans and the passion behind this project.

Kline's own jazz days began in San Francisco in the mid-70s, when the Massachusetts native visited the city and "just fell in love with it," he says. A love for jazz soon followed when Kline got a job at the original Boarding House, where the legendary likes of Herbie Hancock and Stan Getz played. "It was quite an education," says Kline, who was an electric bass player himself and attended the music programs at the College of Marin and San Francisco State when he realized he wouldn't be heading back East anytime soon.

In 1983, inspired by an idea to create a local organization dedicated to jazz, a fortuitous meeting with Kary Schulman, director of Grants for the Arts, led to funding for what was then called Jazz in the City. "We started with a modest festival, but it just started growing from there," Kline says of the organization that evolved with a board of directors, education programs, as well as national and international programming. After a decade, the labor of love became a full-time job for Kline, and expansion continued. In 2000, SFJAZZ officially debuted, by then including a full-fledged spring season in addition to its flagship fall season.

Today you might also know SFJAZZ for its summer concert series throughout the Bay Area, its exceptional middle and high school ensemble programming, or the SFJAZZ Collective, an all-star band commissioned each year to compose and perform new works. Soon enough, you will undoubtedly come to know its new home, "the first stand-alone building designed for jazz in the country," Kline says of the Center (designed by Mark Cavagnero). The idea for such a cultural institution harkens back to 1986. But as of next spring, ground will break on the 35,000-square-foot, 700-seat, state-of-the-art auditorium, which will include rehearsal studios, black-box theater, a digital lab, a cafe, and will host a new lecture series, rehearsal space, and provide access to world-class musicians.



Kline is also very conscious of how the new Center will serve its immediate community while standing on a global stage. "The glass architecture and the way the physical space is designed reflect the sentiment of getting to the core of what jazz is: a very immediate, visceral, democratic, exciting, in-the-moment art form," he says. "You can drive by or walk by and actually see what's happening. We wanted to create a space where musicians are welcomed and can communicate the best they can with an audience in a place where an audience feels welcome and can best communicate with what's on the stage."

And while Kline has since donated his electric bass to SFJAZZ for visiting artists to use, he is still indebted to the place where his passion for jazz was born. "I'm grateful to this particular city and region for how great it's been to me personally and to this organization." And if your appetite is sufficiently whetted, SFJAZZ's 12th Annual Spring Season opens in March and features Hugh Masekela, Preservation Hall Jazz Band, and Randy Newman, among many others. ■ —JENNIFER MASSONI